



ABRAHAM LINCOLN
and
MARY OWEN

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THREE LETTERS

Lincoln to Mrs. O. H. Browning

I. N. Arnold to O. H. Browning

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FOREWORD

It has been said of Abraham Lincoln by those who knew him intimately, that while he was naturally a sad man, no one was quicker than he to see and enjoy the ridiculous in everything. That he was fond of story telling, no one will deny, and we are fortunate in having his own word for it, that he told stories "not so much for the story itself, as for its purpose or effect." But there were moments when he deliberately sought diversion in story telling both for the relief it afforded him, and for the entertainment it afforded his audience. My motive in again putting in print Mr. Lincoln's humorous account of his love affair with Mary Owen is not at all the publication of the letter itself, but to afford an opportunity of giving to the public two letters that have never before appeared in print, and that fully explain how Mr. Lincoln came to write the story to Mrs. Browning, at the same time exonerating him from any blame for its publication. The three letters that follow were at one time in my possession and I will vouch for their genuineness in every particular.

W E Barker

Lincoln to Mrs. Browning

Springfield, April 1, 1838.

Dear Madam:—

Without apologizing for being egotistical, I shall make the history of so much of my life as has elapsed since I saw you the subject of this letter. And, by the way, I now discover that, in order to give a full and intelligible account of the things I have done and suffered since I saw you, I shall necessarily have to relate some that happened before.

It was, then, in the autumn of 1836 that a married lady of my acquaintance and who was a great friend of mine, being about to pay a visit to her father and other relatives residing in Kentucky, proposed to me that on her return she would bring a sister of hers with her on condition that I would engage to become her brother-in-law with all convenient despatch. I, of course, accepted the proposal, for you know I could not have done otherwise, had I really been averse to it; but privately, between you and me I was most confoundedly well pleased with the project. I had seen the said sister some three years before, thought her intelligent and agreeable, and I saw no good objection to plodding life through hand in hand with her. Time passed on, the lady took her journey, and in due time returned, sister in company sure enough. This stomached* me a little; for it appeared to me that her coming so readily showed that she was a trifle too willing; but, on reflection, it occurred to me that she might have been prevailed on by her married sister to come, without anything concerning me ever having been mentioned to her; and so I concluded that, if no other objection presented itself, I would consent to waive this. All this occurred to me on hearing of her arrival in the neighborhood; for, be it remembered, I had not yet seen her, except about three years previous, as above mentioned. In a few days we had an interview; and, although I had seen her before, she did not look as my imagination had pictured her. I knew she was oversize, but she now appeared a fair match for Falstaff. I knew

she was called an “old maid,” and I felt no doubt of the truth of at least half of the appellation; but now, when I beheld her, I could not for my life avoid thinking of my mother; and this, not from withered features, for her skin was too full of fat to permit of its contracting into wrinkles, but from her want of teeth, weather-beaten appearance in general, and from a kind of notion that ran in my head that nothing could have commenced at the size of infancy and reached her present bulk in less than thirty-five or forty years; and, in short, I was not at all pleased with her. But what could I do? I had told her sister I would take her for better or for worse; and I made a point of honor and conscience in all things to stick to my word, especially if others had been induced to act on it, which in this case I had no doubt they had; for I was now fairly convinced that no other man on earth would have her, and hence the conclusion that they were bent on holding me to my bargain. “Well,” thought I, “I have said it, and, be the consequences what they may, it shall not be my fault if I fail to do it.” At once I determined to consider her my wife; and, this done, all my powers of discovery were put to work in search of perfections in her which might be fairly set off against her defects. I tried to imagine her handsome, which, but for her unfortunate corpulency, was actually true. Exclusive of this, no woman that I have ever seen has a finer face. I also tried to convince myself that the mind was much more to be valued than the person; and in this she was not inferior, as I could discover, to any with whom I had been acquainted.

Shortly after this, without coming to any positive understanding with her, I set out for Vandalia, when and where you first saw me. During my stay there I had letters from her which did not change my opinion of either her intellect or intention, but on the contrary confirmed it in both.

All this while, although I was fixed, “firm as the surge-repelling rock,” in my resolution, I found I was continually repenting the rashness which had led me to make it. Through life, I have been in no bondage, either real or imaginary, from the thralldom of which I so much desired to be free. After my

return home, I saw nothing to change my opinion of her in any particular. She was the same, and so was I. I now spent my time in planning how I might get along through life after my contemplated change of circumstances should have taken place, and how I might procrastinate the evil day for a time, which I really dreaded as much, perhaps more, than an Irishman does the halter.

After all my suffering upon this deeply interesting subject, here I am, wholly, unexpectedly, completely, out of the "scrape"; and now I want to know if you can guess how I got out of it—out, clear, in every sense of the term; no violation of word, honor, or conscience. I don't believe you can guess, and so I might as well tell you at once. As the lawyer says, it was done in the manner following, to-wit: After I had delayed the matter as long as I thought I could in honor do (which, by the way, had brought me round into the last fall), I concluded I might as well bring it to a consummation without further delay; and so I mustered my resolution, and made the proposal to her direct; but, shocking to relate, she answered, No. At first I supposed she did it through an affectation of modesty, which I thought but ill became her under the peculiar circumstances of her case; but on my renewal of the charge, I found she repelled it with greater firmness than before. I tried it again and again, but with the same success, or rather with the same want of success.

I finally was forced to give it up; at which I very unexpectedly found myself mortified almost beyond endurance. I was mortified, it seemed to me, in a hundred different ways. My vanity was deeply wounded by the reflection that I had been too stupid to discover her intentions, and at the same time never doubting that I understood them perfectly; and also that she, whom I had taught myself to believe nobody else would have, had actually rejected me with all my fancied greatness. And, to cap the whole, I then for the first time began to suspect that I was really a little in love with her. But let it all go. I'll try and outlive it. Others have been made fools of by the girls; but this can never with truth be said of me. I most

emphatically, in this instance, made a fool of myself. I have now come to the conclusion never again to think of marrying, and for this reason: I can never be satisfied with any one who would be blockhead enough to have me.

When you receive this, write me a long yarn about something to amuse me. Give my respects to Mr. Browning.

Your sincere friend,

A. Lincoln.

Mrs. O. H. Browning.

*The word "stomached" was misread by Lamon and printed in his book to read "astonished,"—a mistake that has been repeated in every publication of the letter until this, when it is given exactly as Lincoln wrote it.—H. E. B.

Arnold to Browning

Chicago, Nov. 22, 1872.

My Dear Mr. Browning:

I know your kind heart will rejoice to learn that I am again under my own roof, seated by my own fireside.

I have just been looking over Lamons' book upon Mr. Lincoln. Many things in it shock me, as I think they do every true friend of Mr. Lincoln, when he calls him a "wily politician," "cold," "impassive," when he charges him with discarding and forgetting his friends (p. 481), "unhospitable" (482), "ungrateful selfish" (483), he states what in every instance is untrue, but not only so, Lincoln possessed the very opposite qualities. How could he charge him with irreverence and infidelity when he remembers the sublime prayer with which he left Springfield, and the deep religious feeling which pervades all his writings and speeches to the day of his death? Do not you and I owe it to the memory of the dead to vindicate him from these charges?

Most of his book, it seems to me is filled up with trivial and insignificant matters which only prurient curiosity would care for and without any appreciation of the noblest traits of his character. I have just been reading a letter to Mrs. Browning (pages 181-182) which he says it was an "extremely painful duty to publish." If the letter is genuine I cannot conceive the motives which made it his duty to publish it. If you feel at liberty to tell me, I should be very glad to know the history of this letter. Of course I should not use anything you may write without your permission. I should be very glad if you would write me fully in regard to Mr. Lincoln, as you knew him at Vandalia, and Springfield and at Washington. You were much with him, I remember, at the time of Willie's death. Do you know what his religious views and feelings were then? I have been of the impression from some things which occurred, that he was under very deep religious feelings. Do you know whether the statement so generally made that he was

while at Washington, in the habit of prayer and frequent reading of the Bible as a religious book, was true?

I hope you may find time to write a full reply.

With kind regards to Mrs. Browning in which my family join, I am,

Very truly yours,

Isaac N. Arnold.

Hon. O. H. Browning.

Browning to Arnold

Quincy, Ill., November 25, 1872.

Dear Sir:

I am just in receipt of yours of the 22nd instant. I have carefully read the whole of Col. Lamons' life of Mr. Lincoln. It contains many things which I regret to see in print. Admitting them to be true, their publication, was, to say the least, injudicious. Many things which are stated in the book were not necessary to the elucidation, or full comprehension of Mr. Lincoln's character, and should have been omitted. It is now almost forty years since I first made his acquaintance. From that time till his death our relations were very intimate. I think more so than is usual. Our friendship was close, warm, and, I believe sincere. I know mine for him was, and I never had reason to distrust his for me. Our relations to my knowledge were never interrupted for a moment. I can recall no circumstance in his life which would justify a suspicion of treachery to his friends. Of his religious opinions I am not able to speak. It is more than probable we have conversed upon religious subjects; but if we did, I am not able to call back to my recollection anything which was said in such conversations, with such distinctness as to warrant me in repeating it. He held a pew in the Presbyterian Church, of which Rev. Dr. Gurley was pastor, and often attended service there. He not infrequently sent his carriage, of Sunday mornings with a request that I would accompany him and Mrs. Lincoln to church.

Sometimes, after services were over, I would return with them to the White House to dinner, and spend the afternoon with him in the library. On such occasions I have seen him reading the Bible, but never knew of his engaging in any other act of devotion. He did not invoke a blessing at table, nor did he have family prayers. What private religious devotions may have been customary with him I do not know. I have no knowledge of any.

At the time of his little son Willie's death, Mrs. Browning

and I were out of the city, but returned to Washington on the evening of the same day of his death. The President and Mrs. Lincoln sent their carriage for us immediately upon learning that we were in the city, and we went to the White House, and remained with them about a week. His son Tad was also very ill at the time, and I watched with him several consecutive nights. The President was in the room with me a portion of each night.

He was in very deep distress at the loss of Willie, and agitated with apprehensions of a fatal termination of Tad's illness; but what his religious views and feelings were I do not know. I heard no expression of them. My impression is that, during the time I remained at the White House on this occasion, he had several interviews with the Rev. Dr. Gurley but what occurred between them never came to my knowledge. Dr. Gurley is now dead, and I am unable to say whether he left any record of his conferences with the President.

I know that Mr. Lincoln was a firm believer in a superintending and overruling Providence, and in super-natural agencies and events. I know that he believed the destinies of men were, or at least, that his own destiny was shaped and controlled by an intelligence and power higher and greater than his own, and which he could neither control nor thwart. To what extent he believed in the revelations and miracles of the Bible and Testament, or whether he believed in them at all, I am not prepared to say; but I do know that he was not a scoffer at religion. During our long and intimate acquaintance and intercourse I have no recollection of ever having heard an irreverant word fall from his lips.

The letter published in the biography, purporting to have been written to Mrs. Browning, is genuine. In the winter of 1836-7 we were all at Vandalia, then the seat of government of the state. I was a member of the Senate and Mr. Lincoln of the House of Representatives. He and I had been previously acquainted, but he then first made the acquaintance of Mrs. Browning. We all boarded at the same house. He was very fond of Mrs. Browning's society, and spent many of his eve-

nings and much of his leisure time, at our rooms. We were all there together again in the winter of 1837-8, the same relations subsisting between us as during the preceeding winter. After our return home, in the spring of 1838 the letter in question was received. We were very much amused with it, but both Mrs. Browning and myself supposed it to be a fiction; a creation of his brain; one of his funny stories, without any foundation of fact to sustain it. It was laid away, among other letters, and forgotten. In 1861 I was overhauling a correspondence which had been accumulating for years and destroying many hundreds of letters which I regarded as no longer of any value. This with other letters of Mr. Lincoln's was then exhumed, and saved from the common fate, only because it was amusing and written a long time ago, in the very characteristic style of the then President.

We permitted a few of our friends, both here and at Washington, to see it, merely as a matter of curiosity and amusement; we still laboring under the impression that it was pure romance.

I think it was in 1862 that a gentleman who was collecting materials for a biography of Mr. Lincoln, having heard of this letter, called on Mrs. Browning in the city and requested a copy. She declined to give it. The first time she was at the President's, only a few days after, she informed him of the request that had been made and asked him what he had to say in regard to it. She then first learned from him that the narrative of the letter was not fiction but a true account of an incident in actual life. He added that others of the actors than himself were still living; that it might be painful to them to see the letter in print; and that on their account he desired it should be withheld for the present; but that hereafter, when those most interested should have passed away, she might exercise her own discretion. After the death of Mr. Lincoln one of his most intimate friends, Col. Lamon, who was on confidential relations with the President through the entire period of his administration, was permitted at his earnest request, to take a copy; but upon the distinct understanding that it should never

be used in connection with Mrs. Browning's name. I do not see how Mr. Lincoln can justly be censured for writing the letter. It was written in the confidence of friendship, with no purpose, or expectation, that it would ever become public. No names were mentioned, nor was it likely that any other name than his own would ever be known in connection with it. His only object seemed to be to amuse a friend at his own expense.

No injury was done to anyone by the mere writing of the letter, nor would there have been by its publication, unaccompanied by the explanation given by his biographer; and for these Mr. Lincoln ought not to be held responsible.

Neither Mrs. Browning nor myself ever knew from him who the lady referred to in the letter was. Of course neither of us ever asked him, nor did he ever inform us. If the feelings of others have been injured, I think it is chargeable upon the biographer, and not upon Mr. Lincoln.

I am at present, much occupied with professional duties, and have written you hastily, but have, I believe answered all your inquiries as fully as I am now capable of doing. It gives us great pleasure to hear that you are again comfortably settled in your own home.

Mrs. Browning and Emma unite with me in kindest regards to Mrs. Arnold, your daughters and yourself.

Truly your friend,

O. H. Browning.

Hon Isaac N. Arnold,

Chicago, Ill.

